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## Sita's Red Dress: Introduction

### i) The mystery of the Cathedral on the Ridge

December 2006, I am making my way up a smooth, broad, path in the Indian Himalayas. My instinct is to move through the thin mountain air quicker than is wise, but my progress is slowed by loose clusters of wool-wrapped people from the plains. They leisurely drift up the path, moving as much side-to side as forward, while I pant past like a steam-train, momentarily losing the sound of my breath in the upsurge of their exclamations. I pause, my way barred by a group of Bengalis, who expansively gesture at local crafts, displayed in the windows of the mock Tudor riparian; and, at that moment, a different kind of chatter catches my attention, drawing my eyes up to the jagged roofline, where frantic monkeys have caught a crossed line with the tourists below. The humans simply ignore the frenzied communication of the assembled simians, effortlessly filtering them out of the landscape and (with the tension resolved) I turn to the road ahead. But I do not move forward, I stand rooted to the ground, for as my eyes refocus, I see clearly the sharp outline of Christ Church Cathedral, softened by a haze of gently falling snow.

From this vantage point the Cathedral only partially reveals itself through the mountain rock and deodar leaf that stands between us. Yet, the Cathedral still manages to somehow dominate the view, as though the hint of its future revelation is enough to overcome the limits of its present manifestation. Its tall, Gothic style, tower, painted a bright yellow, contrasts with both the grey of the sky and the muted vegetal colours that surround it: rock mountainside, tin roof, tree branch and tree leaf. As I draw closer, the verdant softness falls away and all that is left is the sharply sloping mountainside and soaring Gothic parapet, at once imposing and inviting – inviting perhaps because it seems to speak to the mystery of this place and its people; imposing perhaps because it speaks of a history of imposition that I would rather forget. There is then a dual allure here, a sort of salty-sweetness, of something at once strange and

familiar. The Cathedral appears to be a place out of place, it whispers complex histories and in so doing threatens to reshape my comfortable understandings of the unfurling of life, the expression of faith and the nature of identity in these hills.

As I draw closer to the Cathedral I move through a corridor of buildings that have an increasingly substantial feel. They are grander now, although still largely Tudor in style, and house up-market, international, clothing brands, eateries and coffeehouses. Throughout my ascent the Cathedral is a constant reference point, revealing different aspects of itself in relation to the landscape around it, sometimes in dialogue with the cluster of Tudor buildings below, sometimes setting its relation to the blanket of the deodar trees that cover Hanuman's sacred hill behind, and sometimes speaking to the distant peaks of the high Himalayas, which form the horizon. My sense of the city at this moment is of a spiral, wound around a sacred, central axle, for it is the Cathedral that binds together the triadic elements of this landscape: colonial buildings below, postcolonial people around and pre-colonial high peaks above.

The silver peaks, which zigzag the horizon, speak to a time before history, what Eliade would call '*Illud Tempus*' (1963: 169), a contraction of then and now, human and Divine. These mythic summits contrast to the two, time-marked, landscapes of the foothills below, acting as a spatial representation of local chronology. Time and space begin to emerge at this point then as key concerns of both the landscape and this book. Within which, we will be led to explore the combination of the visible trace of history with the time obliterating powers of mythological landscapes, as well as the way that myth and history are held in balance by the flow of postcolonial life in these colonially scarred and timelessly sacred mountains.

These mountains are the converging ranges of the South Western Himalayas, which are found in Himachal Pradesh, they form the key setting for this book's exploration of sacred landscapes. However, rather unusually, this book is concerned not so much with life on (or travel to) the high peaks as the life of the Christian communities in the comparatively lowly (and often overlooked) state capital, Shimla. Although these Christian communities may seem like an unusual group to make the focus of a work of Himalayan anthropology, I will show that putting their account at the centre of this work is natural, transformative and (precisely because it is counterintuitive) necessary. The book draws on over 10 years of fieldwork in the region, blending ethnography, auto-ethnography and textual study, as it moves to explain the mystery that lies at the heart of Shimla's Christian communities; the pursuit of this mystery will lead us to

challenge the established paradigms of postcolonial theory, South Asian studies, global Christianity and material culture.

## ii) Sacred landscapes and material culture

Back on the trail the path spirals upwards, moving me around the Cathedral before eventually bringing us face-to-face. Seen from across the broad expanse of the ridge, the Cathedral seems a less imposing and more inviting site. Its bright yellow appearance gives it a festive feel that is further underscored by the crowds of people, popcorn sellers and pony rides that stand between me and it (depicted in Figure 1.1). Moving slowly through the crowds, I come before the four cornered Galilee and there I pause; like a penitent waiting for the removal of transgressions, only I do not know yet what my transgressions are. I am not yet aware that it is the very denial of the obvious role of the lives lived in and around this building that is my academic transgression; I only know that I want to be drawn deeper into the mystery of its being. This encounter formed the starting point for the relationships forged in and around this and other similar

Image removed from this deposited manuscript

(Image depicted: B&W photograph, crowds at the  
Christ Church Cathedral, Shimla, North India  
(31.10450739428256N, 77.17591769797329E)

Image can be found in published book

**Figure 1.1** Christ Church Cathedral.



buildings that have resulted in this book, which is both an exploration of the mystery that the Cathedral represents and an account of the blended material religion that I found in this postcolonial city. This is therefore a book about relationships with places as much as with people, what Plate (2015: 4) calls the material aspects of religious life.

Although a focus on materiality is a seemingly obvious outcome of research with a fieldwork component, it has been less central to ethnographic accounts than might at first be presumed (Conkey 2006: 356). That is not to suggest that there has been no attention to material artefacts in anthropology, to do so would be disingenuous, given the long history of development in this area. The work of Boas (1927) is heavily focused on artefacts, Malinowski (1922) famously discusses the circulation of objects and Lévi-Strauss (1975) masks, to name but a few. There is however a sense that, at least since the 1980s, there has been a growing movement towards the recognition of the centrality of material artefacts to our understanding of human-society. This book is therefore able to draw on the literature and momentum surrounding this 'material turn' (cf Hicks and Beaudry 2015, Miller 2009, Woodward 2007, *et al*) at the same time as looking beyond it to the nature of a life lived in relation to sacred materials.

The religious significance of materials has historically been overshadowed by approaches to religion that have focused on philosophical questions of existence (Plate 2015:4). A material turn in religion seeks to refocus attention on the everyday reality of engagement with materials, which is a fundamental process of human existence. The material religion movement of today is therefore clearly linked to the wider material culture movement but has gathered real momentum as an independent entity over the last ten years. At the time of writing there are two edited volumes (Morgan 2010, Plate 2015), a journal (*Material Religion*) and a conference<sup>1</sup> dedicated to the study, as well as, of course, this book series. This emerging and ever strengthening body of literature can be seen, for our purposes, to have two distinct approaches within it, which I will term 'object centric' and 'craft centric'.

An object centric approach focuses on material artefacts as completed objects that offer alternative insight into the underpinnings of a more vernacular religion (Bowman and Valk 2012) than the traditional attention to the philosophical/theological formal religious thought of religious elites (Hume 2013, Kilde 2005, Roose 2012, *et al*). Although this body of work usefully highlights the importance of both the everyday and the physical elements of religion it does not sit well with the demands of my field site. The situation that I encountered requires serious attention be paid to the importance of human relations with the non-

human elements of the material landscape, which forms a series of ongoing processes. Consequently, this book has less interest in the finished artefact as a gateway to the human mind (or minds) that lie behind it and instead focuses on the ecology of relationships (Bateson 2000) that that form at a node of sacred significance.

This more dynamic understanding of materiality jars with an object centric approach to material religion and suggests that Christ Church Cathedral requires a different tack be taken. In doing so the book distances itself from the several works of material religion that specifically address Christian Cathedrals of Western-Europe (Aravecchia 2001, Irvine 2011, Shackley 2002, Sheldrake 2001). That is not to say that these texts are irrelevant, indeed, it was no doubt partly because of the way that these works conditioned my initial response to the environment that Christ Church Cathedral first appeared to me as a mysterious and alluring building, prompting questions about both historical creation and contemporary relation (or recreation). This hook initiated the research project and forms a starting position, however time spent with the cathedral led in a rather different direction and demanded that questions centred around understandings of creation, creator and owner be replaced by questions of belonging and becoming, which naturally arise through a craft centric approach to material religion.

A craft centric approach forms a clearly emerging vein in the material religion literature (Grimes 2011, Meyer 2015b, Whitehead 2013). This approach engages material religion with theories of personhood that are typically drawn from the work of phenomenological thinkers, including Bateson (2000), Ingold (2015) and Merleau-Ponty (1962). These theories draw inspiration from ongoing mutual processes of becoming that drive much of the contemporary environmental art movement (Goldsworthy 2009). This is the vein of material religion that I will follow in this book, for it is through this approach that I am able to unlock the mystery of how Shimla's historical processes of sacred crafting are hidden in plain sight. I therefore adopt an Ingoldian (2007a) switch from artefacts to ongoing, multiple acts of becoming as way of gaining insight into the ways that postcolonial populations (through everyday acts of worship) overcome the traumas of history. Crucially, this involves a broadening of our understanding of the relationships under discussion: moving from a model of creator and created to a series of ongoing, mutually constitutive relations, which encompass a wide-range of people and materials – a movement from religious objects to sacred landscapes.

I find the idea of sacred landscapes a useful way to phrase the issues with which this book is concerned. In distinction to the closely (and perhaps more



fashionable) term space, landscape has a sense of dynamism to it, and of interplay between human and non-human (Olwig 1996) that captures the relational aspect, which my fieldwork revealed as central to life in the Shimla hills. In its contemporary use, by geographers, such as Wylie (2007), and anthropologists, such as Ingold (2000, 2011), there is a common trend of understanding landscape as a 'polyrhythmic composition of processes' (Ingold 2000: 201). From this perspective landscape is not something that is perceived, nor is it the backdrop that human action unfolds upon, rather it is a mutual constitution of person and place through action (Ingold 2000: 198–201). As people flow and knot around certain places, landscapes are formed which bind together the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate, the past, the present and the future. This temporal blurring is facilitated by a dual process of narrativization (Basso 1996) and actions, which leave a trace that others will to some extent have to reckon with in the future (Ingold 2007b). From this perspective landscapes are never complete; they are in a constant state of becoming (Ingold 2000). Threads in the landscape are drawn together as they wind and knot around sites of significance, where they become entangled, each enmeshed in the being of the other (Ingold 2011).

The above understanding of landscape resonates strongly with my experience of life lived in and around Christ Church Cathedral, a sacred site enlivened by worship, but not limited to being a place of formal worship. It exists at the centre of a nexus of relations and actions that are constantly coming into effect as people wind around the place. Christ Church is a Cathedral that I experienced as both geographically and symbolically central to the life of people in this Himalayan city and a reflection on the processes by which it becomes and remains central is a core concern of this book. Through a demonstration of the operation of these processes I seek to stretch established material religion theory and demonstrate the need for a radically new understanding of postcolonial life in the region.

### iii) Postcolonial life in the Land of the Gods

It is November 2006 and I am sat with Urmi and her two teenage children in their South Delhi apartment. We sip sweet tea and nibble namkeen (a fried snack), the roar of the city below is transmuted to a murmur, a background gurgle, by the time the gentle breeze brings it through the open fretwork windows. Cocooned in this comfortable setting, our talk turns to the thrill of the

possibilities of fieldwork in the Himalayas. The tranquil atmosphere is however transformed when I casually suggest Shimla as somewhere that I would like to explore before moving on to the higher Himalayas in search of a 'real' field site. At hearing this Urmi looks distinctly unimpressed, her expression communicates her dismissal even before she replies:

"We don't like Shimla, it's not as a hill station should be".

Surprised by the way that a casual mention of Shimla has prompted such a visceral response I probe further,

"How'd you mean?"

"Well", she replies, "it's too built up, too popular, there're too many people, it's not like the Himalayas . . . they put a lift there! A lift in a hill station!"

Although Urmi's words were meant to ward me off a visit to Shimla they had the opposite effect, opening instead a sense of intrigue, and for the first time I felt the allure of Shimla's mystery. I was left with a nagging question: why should Shimla illicit such a strong negative response from someone whose connection to it is so limited? I decided that a visit to Shimla would remain part of my plans. After all, I reasoned, it was a convenient stop on my way to higher climbs. I had, however, not reckoned on how powerful a snare this mystery could be, nor did I have any sense of the way that Shimla would come to dominate the next decade of my life.

I have encountered many similar reactions to a mention of Shimla, over the years that have passed since this conversation, often from people with a fleeting connection to the place and occasionally from people who have never visited. The objections raised to Shimla in these conversations are nearly always some form of rejection of its landscape. In particular, it is suggested that humans have somehow ruined the landscape through both their continuing presence and the trace of their historical presence. Landscape, in this discourse, is implicitly defined as something, given and natural, perhaps shaped by the gods, but only debased by humans. There is then a dichotomy of 'natural' and 'cultural' products, which is precisely the sort of binary that the idea of landscape as a process is supposed to dissolve (Ingold 2000: 197). Yet, it cannot be denied that these understandings both exist and inform a great deal of interaction with Shimla and indeed the wider Himalayan region.

This is perhaps not surprising; I encountered similar reactions when walking with people from India's metros in rural Himachal Pradesh (Miles-Watson & Miles-Watson 2011). There, as here, the reaction was born from a history of imagined engagement with these regions, which lends the Himalayas a high



degree of importance for millions of people who have never been there. In both classical Hindu texts and popular imagination, the Himalayas are a place shaped by the actions of mythical figures in the time before time and they are of central importance as a mediating space between mythic and lived reality (Eck 2012: 3). The high Himalayan peaks are said to be full of *tirthas*, or sacred crossing points, where the Gods and humans meet in a more powerful way than the home shrine (Eck 2012: 7). The Himalayas play an important cosmological role for the millions of people that come under the broad rubric of Hinduism, despite the fact that many thousands of miles may lie between the mountains and the devotee. This cosmic understanding of the Himalayas however seems to have no place within it for urban cities like Shimla, which have the marks of historical processes, both colonial and post-colonial, so clearly inscribed on their landscape; such places jar with expectations and if they cannot be filtered out of the experience they are re-categorized as a place, out of place, a broken landscape.

No doubt such an understanding lay behind Urmi's dislike of the city; indeed, it is clear that the scale of development in Shimla is directly proportional to the strength of her reaction, for Shimla is perhaps the most dramatically developed of India's Himalayan cities. Shimla is the state capital of Himachal Pradesh, a small largely rural state in the central North West Indian Himalayas. It immediately jars with the image of this region as a place of timeless tradition, cut off from the flows of modern life, because of both the mass of people present and the fact that it draws economic migrants in from all-over the country. In total, around one hundred and seventy-five thousand people are considered as residents of the city, but over half of these are classed as a floating population (Chandramuli 2011: 47). Shimla's political networks extend well beyond the city's borders and it is the home of the state government and the state university, as well as a wide selection of service and retail industries. Shimla is then, in many ways, more a hypermodern city (Coleman and Crang 2002: 1) than a Shangri-La (Hilton 1933).

Shimla's sites of postmodern capitalism are places with an obvious history that stretches back beyond the living and captures something of the actions and desires of those who are now dead. One of the reasons that so many tourists flow from the plains into Shimla each summer is the perceptible presence of colonial history among these hypermodern spaces. Although the city was renamed Shimla in 1983, as part of a pan-national project, old Simla (as this city was once called) still proudly proclaims its past. Indeed, many local residents will still refer to what they see as the meaningful parts of the city by the old name of Simla. This recalls its time as the summer capital of British India and the seat of

European power in the subcontinent (discussed further in Chapter Two). It is internationally famous today primarily for that connection, but it is always more than that and while it resonates with a wider colonial process it is a unique place. Sadly, in the popular imagination and the countless historical novels that it has inspired, the unique nature of Simla is lost in the mist of nostalgia for an imagined empire, thick with Orientalist (Said 1979) assumptions.

The most recent manifestation of this popular nostalgic view of Simla is the British drama 'Indian Summers', which made the remarkable decision to use a coastal location on an Indonesian island as the film site for a drama set in Simla, presumably because it assumes that all colonial towns in the Orient look the same (Miles-Watson 2015). The assumption 'Indian Summers' makes of a pan-oriental unity in the colonial experience that may connect to assumptions that many colonials recorded. However, Indian Summers neo-colonial disregard of altitude moves it away from the colonial understandings, where combinations of virgin-mountainside and colonial construction were the two key ingredients for the birth of places like Simla. This book operates to undermine these assumptions, it stands clearly against the neo-colonialism of the Indian-Summers' crowd and moves both with and against the old colonial viewpoint. For, I will demonstrate that they were indeed right to pay attention to the importance of being on top of a mountain, but were wrong to assume that the moulding of the mountains was a one-way process, for the mountains were working on them at the same time as they were working on the mountains. In this book we will therefore explore this assumption critically before moving to communicate something of the emplaced, richly varied reality, of both old-Simla and modern Shimla.

The modern city of Shimla is a place where the trace of the past is very present, yet the city is not a museum and its forward movement is equally as palpable. It can be presumed therefore that modern Shimla provokes strong reactions because it is at once too postcolonial for the Indian Summers' crowd and too colonial for the likes of Urmi. However, Urmi's rejection of Shimla seemed to have as much to do with postcolonial developments, such as the lift, as colonial developments, like the Cathedral. What is more, the rejection of Shimla, as a place out of place, can be found in some of the earliest colonial accounts of the city (Pubby 1988: 7). This sense of disquiet that some colonial officers had with the landscape of colonial Simla is discussed further in Chapter Two. These accounts suggest that the Simla landscape, even in the colonial period, has a sense of artificiality about it; not really a British landscape in the hills, but also not a native landscape, which is implicitly seen as being more in-harmony with the natural world. This view is echoed by a certain postcolonial discourse and



this correlation suggests that it is not simply the turn from the colonial to the postcolonial that renders Shimla a place out of place, rather it is the way that its landscape manifests an imaginative fusion of European and non-European elements that is uncomfortable for those who wish to keep them separate.

The way that Shimla so obviously manifests the tensions of past action and present life, which lie behind most postcolonial cities is precisely what I was drawn to. Yet, in 2006 I was not yet able to fully appreciate this and certainly had no inkling that the city would capture my imagination in the way that it has. No doubt a large part of this had to do with the way that the Himalayas featured in my own imaginings and how I brought these with me to the field. For, the idea of the Himalayas resonates well beyond Hindu India and countless people, all over the world, are able to imagine a Himalayan landscape. This is because of the stories that they have heard told about such places, stories which on the whole have little place for Shimla; a city that does not fit neatly into the ideal of either a Shangri-La, or a wild, deserted landscape (Pinault 2001:110).

#### iv) From academic ancestors to a discordant ethnography

The anthropologist is not a traveller, they do not so much move through areas as dwell within them. What is more, they do so armed with a history of scholarship and interpretation that generates a different type of engagement and ethnography to popular discourse (Wheeler 1986). Academics, however, also live in wider social contexts and as such are also influenced by popular behaviours, beliefs and narratives. Of course, academic analysis seeks to move beyond popular discourse through both its method and its engagement with canonical literature. However, there is nothing objective about the (perhaps uniquely) subjective experience of fieldwork and the ethnographic record therefore is neither truly objective or all encompassing (Lévi-Strauss 1981). As is now well established, the ethnographic record creates its own narrative (Stoller 1994) and has the effect of guiding the way that we come to understand the material culture of any given place. This guiding effect acts as both a magnifying glass, allowing the academic to easily detect subtle elements of the landscape, and a filter, directing our gaze to such an extent that it filters out other aspects of life in any given region (Miles-Watson and Miles-Watson 2011). It is necessary, therefore, to now consider how this book is both influenced by pre-existing literature and seeks to pull away from this, directing attention to aspects of both the region and the religion that have previously been overlooked.

The Himalayas certainly has a strong and lively tradition of ethnography devoted to it, from the earliest colonial anthropological accounts (such as Hutton 1921 and Von Fürer-Haimendorf 1939), through the twentieth century (notably Beremen 1972, Madan 1965, and Sax 1991), and into the new millennium (including, Hausner 2008, Joshi 2012 and Wagner 2013). Many of these ethnographic texts echo the popular ideal of the Himalayas as a spiritual destination by focusing on pilgrimage (Hausner 2008, Sax 1991, Snellgrove 1961, et al). Others reinforce its popular connection with Shangri-La through a focus on villages (Madan 1965, Mathur 2014, Parry 1979, et al) and tribes (Bhasin 1988, Gooch 1998, Wagner 2013, et al).

Collectively they establish a trend for viewing the region as a timeless place of tribal peoples and religious ascetics loosely populated and dominated by the 'natural world', which is viewed as Divine; in this, the academic literature strikingly resonates with popular understanding. What is more, this trend cannot be dismissed as simple orientalism, for it can be detected in both Indian and Western publications; it is exemplified by two important collections: the Indian based *Anthropological Survey of India's* volume on Himachal Pradesh (Sharma and Sankhyan 1996) and the *Modern Anthropology of India* (Berger and Heidemann 2013), which is a product of the western academy.

The Anthropological Survey of India (hereafter referred to as ASI) is a government funded project (established in 1945 and still ongoing) that aims to document the communities of India. A key strand of this project (from 1985–1992), known as the People of India, proceeded on a state by state basis to analyse the 'communities of India, the impact on them of change ... and the links that bring them together' (Singh 2016). The findings of this were then published in an extensive series of volumes. Himachal Pradesh is represented here and has a weighty seven-hundred-and-fifteen-page volume devoted to it, but this volume focuses almost entirely on essentialist descriptions of different tribes and is written entirely in the ethnographic present. We are told, for example that 'the Badhai, or Barhai, *are* a community of woodcutters and carpenters ... *The* people *are* non-vegetarian ... Women *enjoy* almost an equal status ... [and] *the* community *demands* at least one son' (Sankhyan 1996: 40–44, my emphasis). The dual use here of both essentialisation and presentism, when combined with a focus on rural/tribal identities is a clear and explicit presentation of the way that the ethnographic record of the region reinforces popular understandings, at the same time as drawing attention to specific aspects of life in the hills that are then presented as representative of the whole.



The *Modern Anthropology of India* (2013) is a recent attempt, by largely western scholars, to provide a description of the peoples of India that is better engaged with 'on-going theoretical debates' (Berger and Heidemann 2013: xiii). In contrast to the ASI's desire to be comprehensive, *The Modern Anthropology of India* aims to draw out key texts, themes and ideas, acting as a gateway for further research. It condenses this material into a single volume, which (like the ASI project) proceeds to deal with the country by moving systematically from one region to the next. Such an approach implicitly reinforces the ASI's denial of mobility and transformation, despite the explicit desire to not do this. The *Modern Anthropology of India* captures well the marginalisation of the region of Himachal Pradesh by the western academy. Himachal Pradesh is discussed in a chapter that it has to share with its neighbour, Uttarakhand, which is notably called 'Uttarkhand and Himachal Pradesh' (Sax 2013); even as a combined chapter, the text only runs to nine pages in a book that averages eighteen pages per chapter (Sax 2013: 276–285). What is more, within the chapter, the discussion of Himachal Pradesh is limited to around one page (Sax 2013: 278) and Shimla, the state capital, fails to get a mention at all (ibid). To some extent, this regional blindness is only natural for a book that works primarily by mapping existing ethnography. However, this continuing marginalisation has the (perhaps unintended) unfortunate consequence of reinforcing the pattern of scholarship, drawing the attention of future ethnographers away from Himachal Pradesh, towards other seemingly more interesting regions. Yet, I cannot help but feel that this is something of a tragic oversight, given that Himachal is such a culturally rich and diverse state, with both a famous history and a key role to play in the future of the wider region.

The neglect of Himachal may well be simply a case of people following established patterns of scholarship, which lead them to (somewhat innocently) only see what they have been taught to see. However, it also needs to be considered that the double neglect of Shimla, a famous place with both a powerful historic role and contemporary political position, is as much a deliberate neglect as an overlooking. For, it seems to me that Shimla has been neglected not so much in spite of its historic and contemporary relevance as because of it. Shimla's existence as a modern urban, dynamic, multicultural zone jars with both popular and academic notions of the Himalayas, at the same time as its contemporary relation to colonial history disrupts academic narratives about the postcolonial period (Van De Veer 2014) and unsettles our established hermeneutical frameworks – Shimla is the elephant in the hills!

In its inability to confront the reality of contemporary Shimla, the academy reveals itself as something that has never fully been able to move beyond its

colonial foundations. Indeed, there is nothing new in the discomfort that the academy shows in discussing Shimla and regions like it: colonial officers in India were so concerned about the threat of the Colonial impact on 'native' landscapes that they urged local rulers to establish reserves for Pahari culture (Kennedy 1996: 81); it is striking that after independence, these same reserves became the key focus of anthropologists (ibid.). The ethnographic material contained within this volume is then truly a first step in the reconfiguration of the academic field by drawing attention to Shimla's Christians and the uncomfortable questions that their lives provoke. In 2006, I was part of the problem, heavily enmeshed in the ways of seeing described above, I was intent on largely following the path set before me. Like all good researchers, I had spent time in the library and came to know the region through academic literature well before I travelled there.

When I finally came to the Himalayas I did so with a strong interpretive lens, which meant that I filtered out Shimla's urban communities, partly because of habit and partly because of a subconscious recognition of the uncomfortable questions that they posed for the academy's understanding of religion, identity and postcolonial practice in this region and beyond. However, the reality of spending time in Shimla allowed the place to work on me and the whisper of the mystery to enter into the peripheries of my consciousness, drawing me deeper into the lives of these people. Yet, on that first snowy day, I had no real sense of what I had stumbled into. Although Christ Church had led me to it, it took a further, quite dramatic, event for me to realise that I had already begun my research, taking my first steps on a journey into the lives of these quite remarkable sites of worship and the people, past and present, Christian and non-Christian, who both make them and are made by them.

### v) Sita's tears: disrupting academic authority

Whenever I summon a vision of Christ Church Cathedral, it is always haunted by the image of a woman wearing a vivid red dress. She is sat on the ground outside the church, her head is down, her hair partially covering her face, and she is weeping. Although the image of her desperately crying in this glorious red dress is now so vividly present, my field notes show that this is something of a fiction, or at least a symbolic crystallisation of a historically observed situation. Two weeks after I had first come to Shimla, my future research was indeed shaped by Sita crying outside of Christ Church, but she was not sat on the



ground, nor was she wearing a red dress. Instead, Sita was stood slightly apart from a crowd, dressed in jeans and a simple top, the colour of which I did not record and has long since faded from my memory. She did not sit in solitude, but rather stood in conversation with me, for I was present, shaping the event at the same time as I was shaped by it. Despite these discrepancies my vision expresses reality as much as it is obscures it, for while she was not sat, seated worship was part of her lament, and while she was not wearing a red dress, she was weeping over a red dress – a red dress that she was to wear at her wedding.

I had by this time been led by the allure of the Cathedral into the lives of Shimla's Christian communities, but I had not imagined that I had arrived at a place that was going to be the focus of my research efforts for the next ten years. To the contrary, my understanding of what research in the region entailed was so guided by the ethnographic record that I was unable to see that my research had already begun. I imagined instead that I was still in a position of waiting to undergo real research, which would be undertaken at a later date, high in the Indian Himalayas, with tribal, Hindu, communities. Research in a former colonial capital that was today an urban centre with educated, middle class, Christian pillars of the community was not the sort of research that people travelled half-way around the world to do. However, these communities actually were disruptive anarchic forces, not so much in terms of their resistance of the public centre as their ability to disrupt the academic and popular discourse, reshaping established paradigms. My own disruption began suddenly with Sita's tears and moved from there to a refocused position of harmony. That journey is recreated in this book, with the intent that it will similarly disrupt wider complacent assumptions, thickening the discourse and allowing for a refocusing on an equally important other.

Part of the reason for my initial oversight was the very identification of anthropology with Christianity. Today such a position is unlikely, but in 2006 it was commonplace. The explosion of interest in the anthropology of Christianity over the last decade is quite remarkable and has undeniably transformed the subdiscipline of the anthropology of religion. However, when I stood next to tearful Sita, fourteen years ago, the anthropology of Christianity in general was in a nascent state. Both the Cannell (*The Anthropology of Christianity*, 2006) and the Engelke and Tomlinson (*Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*) volumes, which together announced the sub-discipline to the global stage, appeared later that year and the landmark Bialecki, Haynes and Robbins text (*The Anthropology of Christianity*, 2008) would not be published for a further two years.

My research with the Christian communities of Shimla has therefore unfolded and developed against the backdrop of a turn towards the study of Christianity within anthropology, which both benefited my work and complicated it, especially when my own experience has contradicted key assumptions of the anthropology of Christianity movement (detailed in chapters five and six). If, in 2006, the anthropology of Christianity was a marginal area, then the anthropology of South Asian Christians was doubly marginalised. Even today, South Asian Christians are clearly less central to the anthropology of Christianity debates than say African Christianities, and it is common for people to assume that work in India focuses on Hindus, while work in the Himalayas draws primarily on Buddhists. The situation has however improved since Rowena Robinson was able to complain that 'writing about Christianity in India suffered from enormous neglect' (Robinson 2003a: 12).

Over the last fifteen years the development of the anthropology of Christianity (Bialecki, Haynes and Robbins 2008, Cannell 2006, Engelke and Tomlinson 2006 et al) has combined with a more widespread interest in popular Indian Christianity (Raj and Dempsey 2002) to help generate a far richer ethnographic record of Indian's Christians (Jain 2009, Raj 2002, Schmaltz 2010 et al). Great progress has been made over the last fifteen years in broadening understanding of contemporary global Christianity in general and Christianity in India in particular, there are however still notable gaps in the ethnographic record. It is still the case, for example, that the majority of material written about Christians in India focuses on the South of India and avoids certain regions, such as Himachal Pradesh, altogether. When, in 2006, I first began working with Christian groups in Himachal Pradesh I understood the main contribution of my work to be that of adding an account of the Christians in this region to the ethnographic record, presenting a missing piece of the puzzle.

It soon became clear, however, that the study was pushing me beyond this humble goal, for the lived reality that I was entering into transformed the discourse, by moving beyond the ideal types, colonial politics and Indian power structures that are commonly used to understand Christian groups in this region (Robinson 2003b: 864). For, although the Christians that I was working with in Shimla have a connection with the colonial period that is attested to by many now classical studies of India's Christians (Fuller 1976, Mosse 1996, Robinson 1998 et al), the issues that I saw surrounding colonialism focused more on landscapes of worship than on caste. Shimla's contemporary Christians have been airbrushed out of the ethnographic record precisely because of their centrality to life in the contemporary city and the wider trends this points to.



This ethnography then has the power to unsettle established discussions and theories at the same time as it joins with them.

Historians, unsurprisingly, have had little trouble in placing Christian communities at the heart of colonial India and there have been several notable historical studies of Christianity in South Asia (Bayly 1989, Baumann 2008, Frykenberg 2010, Phan 2011, Robinson 2003a), which present survey histories that focus on the developmental scheme of Christianity from the earliest days, through the colonial period into the present. I have found one of the most useful aspects of such studies, for this research, to be that they succeed in highlighting the diverse roots of Christianity in the region. In particular, where they draw on the heritage of precolonial Christian missionaries, colonial Christian missionaries (Catholic Portuguese, French and Protestant, largely British and American), as well as postcolonial impulses, which are largely driven by American evangelism. The detail of these historical surveys has tended to focus on certain regions and communities, especially those in South India, including Mar Thomist and Portuguese Catholic, communities; there are several excellent histories of certain groups and regions in the South of the subcontinent. These texts pick out the important histories of, especially caste politics (Caplan 1987, Dempsey 2001, Mosse 2012), but also inculturation (Collins 2007) and gender (Kent 2004) in the historical development of minority communities' identity.

The, largely monoculture, south Indian, historical, studies that have dominated the academic discussion provide a useful comparator for my own engagement with the multicultural, contemporary, North Indian, Christian communities of Shimla. At certain points, this book sings in resonance with the picture that is formed of Christianity in India by the collective weight of the historical record, however at other times my experiences are strikingly discordant and it is precisely in these discordant moments that this ethnography opens understanding of the contemporary situation in this Himalayan region. This ethnography is therefore a necessary corrective to the paucity of modern scholarship, historical or otherwise, that addresses the churches in the North West Himalayas. By drawing previously overlooked, distinct, voices into the conversation I am able to present an alternative vision of Christian practice in India that is at points strikingly different to the established narrative yet equally as authentic. Through this I open understanding of the complexity of faith in the modern Indian nation. There are however very useful accounts of the life of Christians in the North West Himalayas that date from the colonial period, which largely explore the development of Christian mission in the region.

I have found, in particular, the *Parochial History of Shimla* (Wilkinson 1903) and *The Rural Church in the Punjab* (Lucas and Thakur Das 1938) to be two key primary source documents. These, along with other, harder to find, archival data, provide a backbone of archival material that supports the contemporary, ethnographic descriptions. Indeed, it is impossible to deal with such a rich historical environment (and movement) without engaging in some way with ethnographic history (cf Saika 2004). That said, this book is not intended to be another historical account, it is born from engagement with contemporary societies and it is to the contemporary situation that it primarily speaks.

When we turn to the present day, scholarly material discussing contemporary Christianity in the region is limited to one unpublished thesis, produced by a member of Shimla's Catholic community, as part of the requirements for a degree in Political Science at Himachal Pradesh University (Chug 2000). This work is not in any way ethnographic and is largely a presentation of statistical survey data. I have found the survey data to provide a useful quantitative balance to my own more qualitative research and use this to help understand how the specific instances that I am describing might fit into wider trends. This book is not an attempt to capture the entirety of Himachali Christianity, rather it is interested in communicating the important lessons that I have learnt during specific interaction with Christians and Hindus whose material religion entangles in and around the two active Cathedrals of Shimla. It looks to the past and the future but is clearly situated in a particular point of these communities ongoing development, by drawing on ten years of fieldwork in this region (between 2006–2016). This fieldwork was at times undertaken on my own and at times undertaken with my wife, but always with the generous support and guidance of those Himachali people that I had the privilege of spending time with. While many people (both human and non-human) shape this work I have to acknowledge that it never would have come about were it not for the revelation offered by Sita's tears.

I had met Sita a couple of weeks earlier, when she joined me and another congregant for coffee after a church meeting. She was then in her twenties, a local educational professional, who seemed confident, bright and articulate. Two weeks later, it was a rather different aspect of herself that she revealed and in so doing opened my eyes to the necessity of the research that is encapsulated in this book. We had travelled together to a large and unusual inculturated Christmas event that was taking place in the courtyard of Christ Church Cathedral (discussed in detail in Chapter Six). As the service unfurled behind us, Sita turned to me and began to tell me that she was facing a dilemma in her life



because she was to be soon married in a red dress, but it was her desire (and as I understood it a family tradition) to get married in a white dress. It was clear that this seemingly minor detail of her life tapped into something of greater significance as she became ever more distraught, pleading with me for answers in what could only be a rhetorical fashion:

“Why is it that we [and she used the plural] should always be the ones to compromise?”

And then again as the Christian Swami’s song filled the air she asked with tears in her eyes:

“Why is it that our traditions are not viewed as authentic?”

In that moment, moved by the vulnerability that this relative stranger had displayed, as the Christian sannyasin reached a new octave, the finely spun enchantment of the academy was broken by the force of the material experience. I felt Sita’s comment personally; it was as though I had been doubly wounded by both her confession and her seeming assumption that I was somehow a source of aid, for I was not only without a solution, but part of the problem. I was one of the ‘them,’ I had gone to Himachal precisely with the sort of understandings that were now impacting so severely on her life: understandings about the nature of religion and authenticity in the Himalayas, understandings about the nature of proper anthropological research, the issues of distancing, and the other, not to mention understandings about the nature of inculturated worship and local material culture – in short, the issues that this book explores.

My epiphany led me to the understanding that if I was to do research that had real integrity then I had to allow the alternative vision before me to be given validity. I had to take seriously the testimony and way of life of people like Sita. This book then is in many ways a seditious work, for it presents a tale of Christian stability and order in a region that the academy has variously described as Shangri-La (Buckley 2008), the Land of the Gods (Elmore 2016) and the Anarchist’s Refuge (Shneirerman 2010); it presents a vision of the world that is gained from being attentive to the everyday lives of ordinary middle-class Indians, in a continent so often characterised by accounts of extraordinary ritual (Hausner 2008) and crippling poverty (Jeramiah 2013). Finally, this book talks of religious harmony and peace (both through and within time) against a trend to stress religious divisions and turmoil (Hinnells and King 2007).

## vi) Substance of the book

This book presents a theoretically engaged ethnographic exploration of the material religion that surrounds nominally Christian sacred sites in Shimla, a Himalayan Hill Station. This crafted material religion is an active ongoing process, informed by a colonial past, but also shaped by both the postcolonial present and more distant geological/mythic times. Although the material religion centres on landscapes that are identifiable as Christian, it will be shown that Hindus, atheists and Sikhs all have a role to play in the mutually constitutive relations of animate and inanimate that lie at the centre of these nodes of sacred entanglement. After this initial discussion, we turn in the next chapter to the geographic location of Shimla, which both presents a problem of identity for its contemporary post-colonial population and an opportunity for the development of new understandings of the relation between the past and the present in postcolonial India.

In the second chapter (*Christ in the Land of the Gods*) I draw on archival, ethnographic and autoethnographic material to locate Shimla's communities in their geographic and historic context. This process of contextualisation begins with the seemingly natural and mythologically suggestive geography of the western Himalaya. It then moves to explore the way that Christianity came to be integrated into these landscapes through both the trace left by the material action of wandering Sadhus for Christ and the relating of toponymical mythology today. In particular we focus on two key figures Sadhu Sundar Singh and Samuel Evans Stokes, exploring how they came from opposite directions and met in the middle, before Stokes became a Hindu and Singh went to join the ancient Maharishi of Kailash. The chapter concludes by considering the value of viewing the lives and ministries of Stokes and Singh as part of a broader development of a certain kind of inculturated Christian material religion, which has strong roots in the Shimla district, even if its lack of purchase in the city is equally as marked.

The third chapter of the book (*Recreating Mount Olympus*) narrows the focus to the urban and historically rich geography of the state capital, confusingly also called Shimla. The chapter aims to introduce the nature of life in the modern hill station, however in order to achieve this the chapter has to take account of the important colonial history of this region, where reckoning with the past is an inescapable part of life in the present. We will focus especially on the striking contrast between the material religion of the hills (outlined in the previous chapter) and the material religion of the city. The disjunction between these urban and rural material religions will then be used as a spring-board into the



complex (and yet central) issue of why the landscape of Shimla is unsettling and uncanny for some, yet so reassuring and enticing for others. This in turn leads us to consider the relationship of the Shimla Hills to other sacred mountains, especially when viewed through three important theoretical lenses: homeland, weather world and replication.

The first of these concepts is perhaps the most rooted of the three and this is captured by the idea of *dúthchas*, a sense of home that is rooted in relations (built up over successive generations) with human and non-human aspects of the landscape. The second area of focus moves us to consider how local weather relates to more global issues of climate. By exploring the importance of weather worlds for material religion we therefore move to a more mediated position. The final theoretical concept, that of replication, allows for a focus on the connection between local and global practices, especially when replication is viewed as a device for bridging separately conceived points in space and time. When placed together, these thematic areas of focus help us to approach both the locatedness of material religion in Shimla and the importance of its connection to other places and eras.

Chapter Four (*Churchscape, Landscape and Material Religion*) sharpens the focus again as it explores Christ Church Cathedral as a geographical and spiritual centre of contemporary Shimla. We consider the depiction of Christ Church Cathedral in local art work and the importance of the narratives that surround it for the contemporary population. This leads us to consider the way that past residents are memorialised in the contemporary space and the role of these memorials as a connecting thread through the traumas of history. In order to move towards a deeper understanding of this material we develop here the concept of mythology as a source of truth and explore why it is problematic (from the perspective of material religion) to set history apart from mythology. Crucially, the chapter introduces the specific concept of implicit mythology and its capacity to enrich explorations of material religion. In doing so this chapter develops the core arguments and understandings of this book, which are used in the subsequent chapter to unlock the mystery of the Cathedral on the Ridge.

In Chapter Five (*Worshipping with Ghosts*) we return to the understanding of materiality as implicit mythology, as developed in the previous chapter, this time employing the theoretical construct to interpret experiences with the ghosts of Christ Church Cathedral. These experiences, the book argues, are central to the processes that allow for the postcolonial Christian community to negotiate the material religion of the very visible colonial past. The chapter draws together ethnographic information and theory to both illuminate the site and rework established theoretical understandings. By the end of this chapter a core

understanding of the mystery of Shimla's landscapes will be in place. The chapter builds upon the firm foundation of understanding that earlier chapters in this book have established before moving to present the book's central revelation, which will be returned to again in every subsequent chapter. Each time that we return to this central revelation it is complicated and thickened in relation to further data, loosely following the spiralling method that Lévi-Strauss outlines at the start of his mythologiques project in the overture of the *Raw and the Cooked* (1990: 35). At the heart of both this chapter and the book lies Christ Church Cathedral and the revelation of its transformative powers that is revealed by engagement with Lévi-Strauss' canonical formula  $(fx_{(a)} : fy_{(b)} \cong fx_{(b)} : f^a -1_{(y)})$ . The results of applying this formula to the implicit mythology of Christ Church, which are presented in this chapter, are employed in subsequent chapters as a cypher that enables the decryption of the various mysteries of the Shimla Hills.

Chapter Six (*Materiality, Heterodoxy and Bonding at The Hidden Cathedral*) shifts the focus to the broader churchscapes of the city and in particular, St Michael's Cathedral. Although less visibly central, it plays an important role as a more variegated space of contemporary Christian Material culture than Christ Church, demonstrating alternative ways of nuancing the received elements of material religion and society in the region. The site is particularly strong in a bonding form of religious capital and we use this as a way to explore the value of group identities, before turning to explore (in Chapter Eight) the tensions and issues that surround tightly entangled identities. The chapter then moves from considering people as generators of capital towards an understanding of people as part of a wider process of landscape capital. The chapter deals critically with established notions of landscape and spatial capital and then moves to posit a more complex understanding of a particular type of landscape capital, which I term Cathedralscape capital. The chapter is notable for its lack of centring on Christ Church Cathedral and this allows us to present an important complimentary way of weaving the material threads of postcolonial futures and colonial histories in this region to that already explored in this book. Through this exploration we are naturally led to open the idea of skill, as a core concept for understanding the weave of material religion in this landscape and beyond.

In Chapter Seven (*Ritual, Materiality and Skill*) we develop the core concept of religion as skill, or (to be more precise) as a process of enskilment. The section makes important contribution to wider themes in the study of religion and in particular demonstrates that my conception of religion as a skill and Bergmann's Theological understanding of this are distinct evolutionary forms that draw from a common point of origin. Through engagement with participant observation we



are led to emphasise skill as a process, rather than a value and this allows us to make the shift from skill, to enskilment. We will also, in this chapter, begin to explore the importance of this concept for understanding the field site and suggest possibilities of its importance for reconfiguring wider understandings of religion. In order to do this, we return to St Michael's Cathedral (introduced in Chapter Six) and in particular the way that the landscape processes that surround it operate. The chapter ends with a methodological consideration of the role of the researcher within the landscape and the need to reveal this both as an ethical issue and as a way of generating insight into the processes of enskilment that I am terming 'Prophetic Anthropology'.

Chapter Eight (*Pipe Organs and Satsang*) brings the ideas and accounts of the previous four chapters dramatically together, as we move to consider the material culture of one core, calendrical, ritual, which is centred on Christ Church Cathedral, but engages members of St Michael's Cathedral's congregation. Crucially, we also move out of the restricted consideration of the Cathedral's role from a Christian perspective moving into the wider realm of the Cathedral's role in the city's Hindu cosmology. The chapter refocuses the pluralism debate in South Asia, moving away from notions of the intermingling of substances and towards the idea of the entwining of lines, in an attempt to demonstrate that Hindu communities can be profitably explored as an integral part of Christian worship in contemporary India. Through this consideration we are led into a more general theoretical discussion of the important, but often overlooked, area of mixed-faith identities and the importance of these for challenging assumptions about the nature of contemporary religious identity.

In the final chapter (*The Salt in the Stew*) we return to the central mystery of Shimla that the book began with and now offer an answer to the mysteries of the cohesiveness of material religion in this historically ruptured region. We explore new developments in the landscape, especially around the development of technology and nationalism and put forward new theories for the operations of religion and research more broadly. In doing so we will be led to calls for a reconfiguration of not only our understanding of this region, but also the wider fields of postcolonial theory, South Asian studies, global Christianity and material culture. In particular we will return to the central idea of the book, the call for a prophetic anthropology, which is a consequence of a shift from viewing material religion as a category to a process of enskilment. This in turn demonstrates the value of a focus on landscape for the crucial tasks of rehabilitating mixed-faith identities and destroying unhelpful (often harmful) communal divisions.

## Christ in the Land of the Gods: Context

Shimla is located in Himachal Pradesh (literally the Snowy Region), a small Indian State at the western end of the, formidable, Himalayan mountain range. Himachal's geography and mythology connects it to this wider chain of mountains, which stretches over one thousand five hundred miles and (at its highest points) reaches beyond the clouds to over eight thousand eight hundred metres into the sky (Colebrooke 1827: 35–373). Although the Himalayas are easily identifiable as a unit on a map, or a satellite image, they are on the ground a remarkably varied region that is nonetheless united in the popular imagination by the powerful symbolism of the mountains. If the reader closes their eyes and imagines the Himalayas it is certain that a strong image will be quickly conjured, possibly of snow-capped mountains (depicted in Figure 2.1). This is of course in keeping with much of the Himalayas, but there is more to this region than simply snowy peaks and generally the people who move across this landscape spend most of their time in one of the highly diverse and considerably less snowy valleys than on these unifying peaks. Indeed, Shimla, the focus of this book, is rarely blanketed in snow, even though snow is often visible from it and never far from either the imagination, or conversation of its people. Snow then is not something that this book can afford to dismiss entirely, but it is important to mention that (in my experience) the more time people have been able to give to engagement with Himachal Pradesh the less central snow is to their conceptions of it.

If we return again to the reader's vision of the Himalayas, although it may already be shifting now, I would venture that it initially had (and still retains) an emotional resonance of some sort, it is not simply an image that the reader conjures, but an image with emotional force. What is more, I believe that this will be the case with the vast majority of this book's readers, regardless of if they have ever set foot on these mountains. I suggest this because I know that the stories that are woven around these mountains are both widely circulated and have a certain phenomenological pull, which has seen the lives of a large percentage of this planet's population drawn into some sort of correspondence



Image removed from this deposited manuscript

(Image: snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas,  
shrouded in clouds)

See published book for image

**Figure 2.1** The high Himalayas of our imagination.

with them. These mountain stories speak to deeply held cultural assumptions about the word and trans-cultural phenomenological encounters within the world. As such, they become more than just stories and live within us as ‘values’ and ‘beliefs’ (Davies 2011: 105, 362). They generate ideas that carry an emotional charge, which when bound up with our sense of identity becomes a belief (ibid). It is therefore possible to say that the Himalayas are a part of widespread and disparate belief systems, which range from the orientalist Shangri-La (Buckley 2008) to the Puranic Mount Meru (Eck 2012: 122–125).

At one end of the continuum of belief systems sits the Edenesque myths of the Himalayas, which we are here organizing under the category of ‘Shangri-La’. The name Shangri-La draws from Hilton’s classic 1930s novel ‘Lost Horizon’, which has seen innumerable reprints and adaptations for film, radio and stage (Mather 2017: 233). It tells of a British diplomat who, following a plane crash, happens upon a magical valley, high in the Himalayas where people live long and harmonious lives within a spiritually rich, benevolent, bounteous and truly beautiful environment (Hilton 1933). The story may connect with local ideas of Shambhalla (discussed below), but what is important for our purpose is that it connects with a wider Western mythology of a lost Eden in the hills that both predates the book and stretches beyond the zenith of the book’s popularity (Mullen 2016: 2). Western populations of the last few centuries have found something deeply alluring in the notion of the Shangri-La myth type, regardless of the exact naming of the location, and this attraction continues to exert a

strong influence, even as the name Shangri-La recedes from folk memory (Bishop 2000: 10). The seductiveness of this myth type derives from a European impulse to posit an uncorrupted and unchanging landscape. A landscape where humans act in 'harmony' with other elements, which has the capacity to act as a sort of counterbalance to the fractured known landscapes of home. In this binary model the West is associated with a dynamic existence outside of a subjugated natural realm and this is satisfyingly opposed to a Shangri-La in the East, where the marked feature is a harmonious existence within nature that harkens back to the dawn of humanity.

At the opposite end of the continuum of myths about the Himalayas stands a conception, here termed 'Mount Meru', which is deeply rooted in the literature and traditions of the subcontinent. However, it is important to note that this understanding is richest in material that is found not in the Himalayas themselves but on the great plains below. From here the Himalayas were conceptualised as a sacred and set aside place, associated with healing and encounters with Divinity, as well as being a place to be journeyed to at set times and (mostly) returned from, after a relatively short period; although it was once geographically central and remains cosmically central, it is experienced largely as geographically peripheral. This concept will be discussed in detail in the next section, what is important for our purposes here is to note that this understanding differs from the Shangri-La conception in a highly revealing way. From the perspective of the Indian plains dweller their subcontinent is both horizontally bounded by the Himalayas and vertically joined to the heavens, through the geography of the mountains. Thus, while the Shangri-La myth type places the Himalayas in opposition to the known world, the Mount Meru myth type makes the mountains a mediator between the earth and the heavens.

At one end of the continuum of myths of the Himalayan mountains we therefore have a vision that draws from an oppositional model, while at the opposite end we find a vision based on a model of mediation. Despite these differences, the two concepts are crucially united in a conception of the Himalayas as at once cosmologically central and experientially peripheral. Both the oppositional and mediatory conceptions of the Himalayas are brought together by the sense of the region as an Eliadean *sacred centre out there* (cf Eliade 1959, Eck 1987, Turner 1973). In this understanding, which finds full form in unifying Theosophical discourse (McKay 2015 410–426), the Himalayas are a geographical marker for the symbolically central cosmic pole, or axis mundi, which not only unites, but also provides a centre to an expanded, more than human, cosmology. In order to therefore understand the complex network



of emotionally charged resonances that surround this region we must now therefore explore further the Eliadean idea of the Cosmic Mountain, beginning with its roots in Hindu understandings of the Himalayan region.

### i) Searching for Mount Meru: the sacred centre out there

For most contemporary Hindus, there is a canonical, scriptural, importance placed on the Himalayas, which is evident in the earliest texts and increases gradually through the millennia, into the modern era (McKay 2015). For our purpose, it is convenient to follow the trend of splitting the Hindu textual traditions into three, admittedly hazy, categories (Lorenzen 1999: 636). The first of these is the Vedas, which represent the earliest texts and contain treaties that have tended to be ideologically distant to the everyday life of the majority of contemporary Hindus (Thapar 1989: 212). The second cycle of Hindu mythology is the world of the great epics, namely the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These are well known both through study of their classical texts (which possibly date from as early as the sixth century BCE (Keith 1915) and from engagement with popular performances, which range from folk theatre to television and film productions (Gillespie 1995). The final category is a group of oral and recorded texts known as the Puranas, or old stories, this is a highly diverse group of material that encapsulates the main body of the contemporary Hindu mythical universe (Nagar 2006: 496). The Himalayas have a sacred significance in all three of these categories and yet it is certain that the breadth and depth of material exploring the importance of the Himalayas dramatically increases as we move closer to the present day.

The mountains emerge as a significant cosmological region and source of healing in the earliest of the Vedic scriptures, which are still studied by experts today and have enjoyed a revival of interest in recent years that is partly tied to a rise in nationalism (Nanda 2003: 37–94). The Himalayas also make their presence felt in the great Hindu epics and (particularly in later recitations of these exploits of Gods and heroes) they form an important part of the cosmological landscape. Through these, the mountains become places associated with a wider geography of mythical actions and actors that helps to give sense to the modern nation of India. However, it is in the Puranas, that we find the Himalayas beginning to take central stage, as a place where the Gods dwell still and paradise can be found. In particular, the Markandeya Purana, an early and widespread text, describes in detail a Cosmic mountain that both acts as an axis

mundi that joins the worlds of man and the Gods and a centre around which the cosmos revolves (Dutt 1896: 103). The mountain becomes both a point of crossing, or *tirtha*, between the world of the Gods and the world of men and a source of power, or *pitha* (Eck 2012: 217–293).

In the Markandeya Purana, which is a non-sectarian text (Rangachar 1964: 154), the mountain is the abode of many celestial deities and has large flat top that allows for the housing of all the divinities. However, in popular tradition Mount Meru is most closely associated with the God Shiva, who is one of the Great Gods (Maha-deva) and the chief deity of the sectarian Saivite movement (Whitmore 2018: 74). Saivite renouncers are ideologically positioned in opposition to householders, having abandoned the life of owning possessions, having stability and working towards order, to instead seek out communion with the wild God Shiva, often in the mountains that are closely associated with him. The association of Shiva with these mountains is furthered by the human presence of these ascetics, as well as by Saivite temples and numerous local myths that associate various mountain peaks with the Divinity, his actions and/or his body parts (Hausner 2008: 68). The ascetic renouncers are known for meditating in high Himalayan caves for years at a time, as well as for wandering between the worlds of men and the sacred sites of Shiva, coordinating their movements with those of the sun and the moon to arrive at points of significance at significant times (Hausner 2008: 125). These meaningful wanderings are mirrored in the pilgrimage activities of millions of Hindus, who each year travel to the Himalayas as a way of entering the land of mythology and (in a way that harks back to the Vedas) in search of healing and good health. Many of these travellers journey to sites associated with Shiva and the cries of ‘Jai Shankar’ (Hail [Shiva] the Beneficent), resound around the pilgrimage trail. For these people this Western Himalayan region is then clearly a sacred centre out there. It operates as part of a wider system of cosmology that both places it at the periphery of everyday life and the centre of spiritual revelation.

We have seen therefore that there is a substantial, Indian, tradition, or complex of traditions, that consistently connect these mountains with conceptions of the Holy and (over time) develop increasingly rich narratives around the mountains, alongside patterns of specialised (perhaps ritual) action that brings people either into direct contact with the mountains, or by proxy (such as through associated shrines of replication). This rich tradition however neither positions the mountains as uninhabited, nor regularly inhabited by ‘ordinary people’. To enter into the mountains then is to enter into, or at least draw near to, the realm of a particular element of the sacred. One that is associated with healing and health on the one



hand and the abandonment of security and bodily desires on the other. These seemingly contradictory conceptions are held together by the complex fabric of meaningful action that surrounds the mountains and ensures that they have a strong emotional resonance for Hindus throughout the subcontinent and (especially today) beyond.

## ii) Saffron priests and Christian Sadhus

The high peaks of Himachal Pradesh are intimately connected with Hindu cosmology, but they also had great appeal to several Christian holy men, who were drawn into the mountainous region of Himachal Pradesh by both its association with Divine revelation and the traditions of the Shaivite ascetics. Although the practice of Christian pilgrimage to the peaks of Himachal Pradesh may not have been as widespread as its Hindu counterpart, its historic practice is still highly significant for our understanding of the contemporary material religion of this region. Oral history has largely distilled the practice of the complex of Christian encounters with Himachal Pradesh into the common recitation of the lives of two remarkable Christian figures, Satyanada Stokes and Sadhu Sundar Singh, who both left a lasting imprint in these hills. As we will see, Stokes and Singh are drawn to the mountains from opposite starting positions. They meet briefly in a cave, on the mountainside, before their paths cross over each other and each is increasingly drawn into the space that the other once occupied.

Stokes and Singh present a neat example of the range of possibilities for both the operation and understanding of Christian holy men in the Himalayas, as well as a wonderful example of how human lives can extend their significance beyond death through the sparking of narratives that have a perduring, significant, symbolic resonance. Crucially, I will argue that the ongoing resonance of Stokes and Singh is not a disruptive (or rupturing) force, for it is integrated seamlessly into the wider structures of balance that govern the region. Although Stokes and Singh both have a good range of hagiographical literature devoted to them by interestingly often separate communities, I first became aware of them through the way that they naturally entered my life and discussions while living in Shimla. Perhaps somewhat predictably, I came to know of Sadhu Sundar Singh through conversations with Church congregations, aided by sweet tea. Rather more surprisingly, I was first introduced to Samuel Evans (Satyanada) Stokes, while playing football with Himachali Hindus.

During my time in Shimla I set up a small amateur football club that held regular practice sessions in a picturesque village, located around 20 miles east of the city centre. Flat, grassy, land in Shimla was at a premium and although Annandale, located at the foot of the city, hosted in 1881 the first football cup competition in India, the postcolonial period had seen access to it severely restricted (Kapadia 2001: 18). I thought on one occasion that I had scouted a suitable alternative, this time not below, but above the city's central mall, but this site also met with local objections and even prompted a local resident to compose a protest poem. So it was that we ended up training at some distance from the city and through this move I was gifted my own set of effervescent experiences in the Shimla Hills.<sup>1</sup> These began with the not insignificant journey to the training area, which involved an hour's motorbike ride along roads that wound around the mountainside, followed by a 30-minute trek, through dense forest, before finally arriving at a suitably flat plateau, a clearing in the forest that the mountains gazed down on like giants around a cauldron.

If I was a little apprehensive about doing football training so far from the city at first, once I had undertaken the journey, I never doubted that it was indeed a blessing. I recorded a great exhilaration (even effervescence) about these training sessions, which partly came from the *communitas* of joining with my fellow residents in a collective act of coordinated movement and partly came from joining with the environment of rural Himachal Pradesh (cf Turner 2012: 43–54, 143–165). Our little Shangri-La was a flat, soft, green shelf on a steep mountainside that was both mellowed by gently swaying deodars and reflected in the bright, white, rocky outcrops that ringed the mossy-green clearing. As we ran our studs joined the goats in turning the humic soil and our shouts joined the Himalayan Griffon in piercing the soft blanket of sound made by the whispering trees and chattering bulbul. Looking back now (and in the moment then) it is clear that I felt a loss of the boundedness of myself as I both spilled out into and was gathered up within the environment; this almost religious moment of communion (or *communitas*) seemed to affect us all and leave us with a lasting sense of contentment. The narrativization of this fieldwork, if we can call it that, which I have offered here is important for three reasons. First, it points to the way that my own life is entangled in the very weave that we are here trying to unpick. Second, it demonstrates the way that sacred experiences, religious narratives and seemingly secular action are naturally blended in the everyday unfolding of life in this region. Finally (and perhaps most importantly for our immediate purposes) it presents an important context in which the legacy of Stokes first entered meaningfully into my life. Looking back now, it is striking



that this Christian missionary entered my world quite by chance while engaged in activities that could be seen as secular (playing sport) and in the company of people who would identify as Hindu.

I have made much above about the significance of sport and nature for sacred revelation, but in truth the revelation of the importance of Stokes' ministry did not come during the playing of sport, but rather arose from a discussion surrounding playing sport. I have many fond memories of sitting with Rohit, Prem and a few other members of the group relaxing in the gentle, afternoon sun (after we had finished playing/training) and allowing conversation to take us where it would. It was during one of our earliest engagements of this nature that Rohit turned to me and generously said "You are going to be the Samuel Evans Stokes of our age". Although I was not fully aware of it at the time, it was a significant compliment and one that I could never live up to, for despite us both coming from outside of India, choosing to live in Shimla and being married to Indians, he was able to achieve wide-reaching political and economic reform, whereas I changed little and often took steps to dampen my impact on the region (as will be further discussed in Chapter Nine). Despite these differences, as time went on, I found that it was not unusual for my presence to solicit a recounting of the Stokes mythology, which was commonly known by both Christian and non-Christian residents.<sup>2</sup> It was always recited with fondness and any comparison was, I am convinced, intended as great praise, even if it both presented an archetype of the incomer that I would never come close to embodying and cast into relief the comparative insignificance of my life and actions. In what follows I will detail aspects of Stoke's life that are drawn from a combination of archival sources, the published writings of his close family members and oral recitations as a way of helping to draw out the complexity of his engagement with the landscape of Himachal Pradesh and the life that I lived there.

The story of Stokes typically began by situating him in Kotgarh, which is a small village around 50 miles from Shimla and could variously involve presenting him as an economic reformer, a social rights activist, or a famous Christian Sadhu depending on the context of the oral recitation. Typically, I found that the Christian aspect of his work was highlighted by people within the church, whereas the local Hindu population preferred to focus on the good social and economic reforms that Stokes was involved in, at the expense of an account of his later engagement with Hinduism. All versions of the myth however share certain common features that are largely supported by the historical record. I will first present these as a way of contextualising the shaping of the landscape by historical Christian actors, before turning in a later section (Chapter Eight) to

explore further the differences in these narratives, as well as the centrality of these contestations for understanding the contemporary population's meaning making systems.

Stokes ended his life in Shimla and spent much of it in Kotgarh, but his story begins in North America, where, in 1882, he was born to a family of Quaker engineers, based in Philadelphia (Clymer 1990:54). This was a practicing Quaker household and Stokes therefore entered the world within the frame of a tradition that valued community, quiet reflection, questioning of authority (both religious and secular), as well as Biblical revelation (West 1992). These predispositions remained with him throughout his life, albeit nuanced and emphasised in different ways at distinct times, but he can be readily as beginning life within a particular Western, Christian, tradition. A tradition which I argue remained with him even after his conversion to Hinduism. Stokes journey to that point of conversion and into the landscape of Himachal Pradesh began at the age of twenty-two, when he had a highly formative meeting with the Presbyterian missionary Marcus Carleton (Clymer 1990: 54). Carleton came from a remarkable (although largely today forgotten) family of American Presbyterian missionaries that collectively made a substantial contribution to the development of health care facilities in Northern India (Amherst 248). Carleton's father had established a hospital in Ambala and his sister (also a medical doctor) was highly active in India, running hospitals and leprosy dispensaries (Sharma 2008: 3).

Marcus Carleton was actively involved in a leprosy hospital in the Shimla region when he met Stokes and it seems that Carleton inspired Stokes to abandon his studies and go directly to India, while still in his early twenties, to help with this relief work (Kashyap and Post 1961: 25). However, after his arrival in India Stokes himself became ill and his own struggles with Typhoid resulted in him relocating to Kotgarh, a small settlement, located around 50 miles North East of Shimla city (Clymer 1990:55). Stokes was eventually to settle in Kotgarh and he married there Agnes Benjamin, who was a local Christian of Rajput descent (Sharma 2008:17). It is commonly said that although Stokes came to Himachal Pradesh as a missionary, he was less focused on formal conversion than bringing people to God's love through good deeds, and many are quick to recount tales of how he both effectively worked with the sick and was an avid social reformer. For example, it is commonly said that his very earliest encounters with India led him to the realisation that the best way to help the people of the region was by increasing their means to engage profitably with the emerging market economy. Typically, Stokes' response to the realisation of the centrality of market forces for wellbeing is phrased around two linked areas: agriculture and law.



When Rohit first mentioned Stokes he also described how Stokes transformed the Shimla hills by introducing a radical new crop and he rather strangely saw a connection between this and my own humble, ultimately ephemeral attempts to introduce a footballing culture into the region. Of course the two actions are so tenuously linked that there is no real justification for the comparison, but what is interesting is that in searching for a frame of reference for a Westerner trying to develop something in the region it was Stokes, an outside and missionary, not a formal colonial officer that came to Rohit's mind. What is more, it was the tangible, agricultural innovation and legacy of this Christian missionary that brought him into our conversation. This is because Stokes introduced new methods for the development of apple trees farming in the region and introduced new species of apple, although not as is often claimed, the apple itself (Tucker 1982: 122). Stokes innovation in the region of apple farming was so successful and left such a lasting legacy that today Shimla is known throughout India as a place that cultivates scrumptious apples (Sharma 1997). The initiative that Stokes began has then dramatically changed the landscape in a very tangible way as orchards sprang up among the hills, villages became more prosperous and new transport infrastructure was introduced. It is also at this time that in a large part thanks to a small wooden church, known as St Mary's, made its way unassumingly into the Kotgarh valley, although this is seldom commented on.

The second area that Stokes sought to make improvement was through his social work and in particular his attention to improving the official legal and social status of ordinary, rural, Himachalis. To this end, he was famously involved in a fight to remove the *beggar and beth* system, which was a traditional form of compulsory unpaid service due to the landowners by the peasantry, which many British officials exploited for their own gain (Negi 2002: 17). Stokes saw that this system of indentured labour removed the independence and rights of the ordinary people and he believed it to be akin to a form of bondage (Sharma 2008: 125). He therefore believed that he was called upon to fight this violation of fundamental human rights in the same way that his ancestors had been called to fight the practice of slavery (ibid). Stokes organized a highly effective combination of peaceful non-cooperation, negotiation and publication that resulted in an official climb-down by the British government, who consequently effectively abolished the practice in the region (Sharma 2008: 131). Through these actions Stokes effectively aimed to improve the cultural capital of Everyday Pahari folk at the same time as improving their economic capital. He was highly successfully in both endeavours and the advancement of these two areas has combined to leave a lasting legacy, transforming the socio-economic landscape of the region.

Stokes' work as a social reformer and political dissident were clearly the most important aspects of his contribution to Himachal for my Hindu friends. From this perspective what is important with regards to his Christian missionary roots is that this (and the associated fears of conversion) were not an issue for the acceptance of the indirect benefits that emerged from his social engaged religious practice. The tangible societal benefits of his ministry, despite his missionary orientation brought him the praise of key figures in the Indian independence movement. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, praised Stokes as the ideal immigrant and the chief reason that he did not want all people of western origin to quit India (Clymer 1995). At the same time, Stokes' movement into the sphere of Indian life moved him outside of the acceptable sphere of action for a colonial at that time and brought him the ire of the British government, leading to his eventual arrest and detention (Sharma 2008: 147). At this point, I would argue, Stokes moves outside of the bridging, liminal, status that he had previously held and becomes more firmly associated with the emerging world of the Indian citizen than that of the Western colonial. It is as if we reach a point where the stretching of the Western category towards that of the East reaches a snapping point, catapulting him firmly into the Eastern category, as Gandhi comments, from this position 'his white skin [can no longer] protect ... him' (Singh 2013: 1) A similar, trajectory of movement to the centre and then crossing to the other side can be discerned in Stokes' religious categorization, if not formation. The overtly religious aspects of Stokes' life tend to be downplayed in contemporary recitations of his life, yet religion was clearly an integral part of his life and it factors meaningfully into both the classifications that his contemporaries, put upon him and implicitly in the classificatory systems that are deployed to understand him today.

Stokes approached his Presbyterian missionary endeavour in a way that both drew on his Quaker roots and paved the way for his later engagement with Hinduism. An early correspondence with his mother demonstrates a strong desire to learn about religion in India, especially Hinduism as a way of creating a more equal dialogue (Singh 2013: 1). He soon came to believe that there was a lot that was worthwhile in Hinduism and that if the Christian message was to ever find root in India it would have to do so through the sort of dialogue with Indian society that the Late Roman Stoa had enjoyed in the west (Griffiths 1982). For Stokes this dialogue was not to be found at purely an intellectual level, but also through the material culture and the lived landscape of the religious traditions. Stokes therefore adopted local dress and practices of worship that were familiar to local Hindu Holy men, or Sadhus, who could be found in the



Himalayas (Emilsen 1998: 94–96). He spent time meditating and even came to exemplify the Khadi (wearing of locally spun, natural fibres) movement, even going so far as to call for the banning of all imported clothes (Clymer 1990: 64).

Stokes is remarkable within the region and a somewhat unusual missionary figure, but he is far from unique. He can be seen as somewhat following the footsteps of earlier missionaries, such as Robert De Nobili, a seventeenth century Christian Missionary in South India, who adopted (amongst other things) the material culture of Hindu worship in order to encourage high caste conversion to Christianity (Waghorne 2002: 17). In more recent years this practice has grown ever more popular (as we shall see in Chapter Eight), buoyed up in part by the legitimisation of Vatican II. With many Christians, both before and after Stokes, taking the adaptation of Material culture even further (Emilsen 1998: 94–96). Sadhu Sundar Singh is one notable saffron sadhu for Christ who crossed paths with Stokes both literally and metaphorically before the two journeys lead them to progress along their opposite, if intersecting, trajectories and it is useful to develop a complementary outline of his path here.

### iii) From East to West: the Christian Maharishi

Sadhu Sundar Singh is rarely evoked in Shimla and has been far more central to discussions about Shimla that have taken place in Europe and America than those that I have enjoyed within Shimla itself. However, for many, Singh's saffron robes are the iconic image of material Christianity in this region, easily eclipsing Stokes' (little known, yet substantial) contribution to the Khadi movement. I believe that this is due to the way that Singh affected the landscape and the contrasting degree of fit between this impact and the dominant etic and emic narratives of Christian material religion in this region. The most notable discussion that I had in Shimla about Sundar Singh happened away from the town centre and arose, unprovoked, as an exasperated cry about the lack of evangelical impulse in the dominant church narrative of the time (as will be discussed in Chapter Eight). Outside of Shimla, Singh is well known and frequently mentioned, normally in relation to Christianity in this area, often as an exemplar, sometimes as a warning.

Singh is an iconic Christian figure in the region who is instantly striking for his association with the saffron robe and iconic turban (Dobe 2015: 166). This powerful use of material religion combined with his naturally oriental looks to create a widespread impression of him as a messiah like figure capable of leading

a Christian renewal in its old and decadent heartlands (Cox 2002). The fact that Singh was not born to Christianity but came to it after a road to Damascus type experience further cements his image as a Paul of the modern era capable of both extending and reshaping the notion of what it is to be part of the Christian community (Dobe 2015: 153). It is common to begin the narrative of Singh's life with reference to the fact that he was born into the Sikh religion with an early interest in the study of South Asian religious thought, but a hostile reaction to the Christian Theology that he encountered in Punjabi missionary schools (Thompson 2005: 1–12). Then, at the age of sixteen, it is said that Jesus appeared to him in a vision and spoke to him in Urdu (Sharpe 1990: 176: 51). From that experience, it is claimed, he was led to become a wandering sadhu, following a traditional Indian practice at the same time as spreading the message of the Gospels (Thompson 2005: 45). He eventually left behind the plains and headed towards the Himalayas, where he believed people were closer to God (Streeter and Appasamy 1921: 14–15).

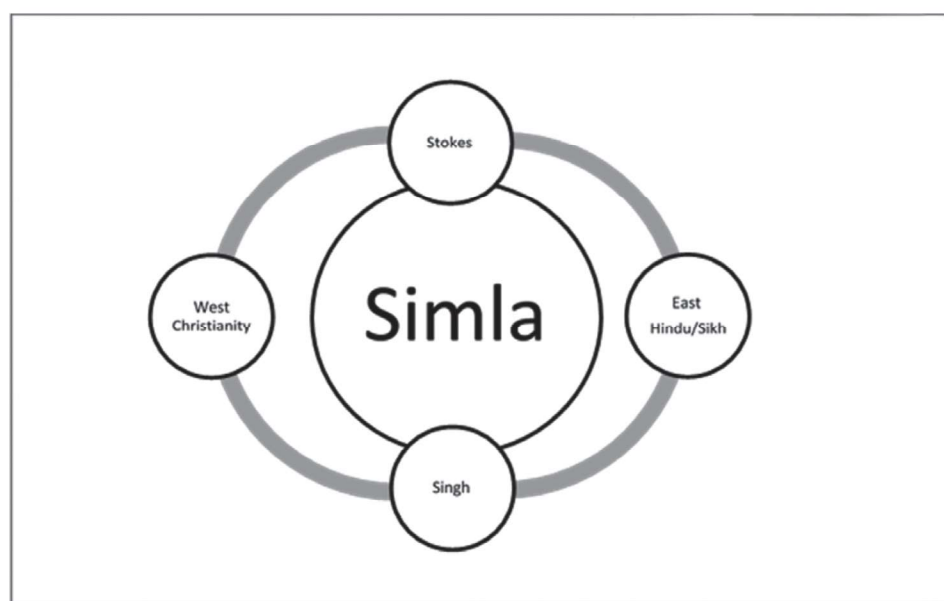
His Himalayan journey lead him to Shimla (then Simla) where he was formally baptised, not at Christ Church, but at what was then known as the 'native church' (Buck 1925: 123). This church was interestingly located on the lower bazaar, which was then (as it is largely now) a less obvious, more organic network of twisting shop lined streets that snake around the mountain between the upper Mall and the lower cart road. Interestingly, the lower bazaar was seen by many Europeans, during the colonial period, as an unwanted incursion of the India of the plains into their European enclave in the hills (Kennedy 1996: 193). As such, it is perhaps not surprising that Sadhu Sundar Singh's Christianity, which is associated more with the mystic allure of the Himalayan peaks of Himachal Pradesh than the ordered streets of Shimla, finds an association with the city in the area of it that spoke to so many of something other than the dream of a European town in the hills.

Singh later travelled with Stokes, the pair sharing together certain ideals of Christianity that drew from a shared belief in the inspirational value of the life of St Francis (Thompson 2005: 53–57), as well as a shared conviction that the most appropriate form of Christianity for India was one that engaged with wider patterns of religious practice in South Asia (Chug 2000: 65). Sundar Singh's influence was not limited to the Indian Himalayas and he was arguably more popular in Europe than in India. In 1921, during a tour of Europe, he is reported to have preached to a crowd of ten thousand at Neuchâtel (Cox 2002: 231). Through such high-profile events Sundar Singh became for many Europeans the archetypal image of both Indian Christianity in general and the Christianity of



rural Punjab in particular. If Stokes therefore represents the European dream of Christianity being reinvigorated by contact with India, then Singh represents the equally European dream of India being transformed by contact with Christianity.

The two come from opposite directions and meet in the middle, with perhaps Stokes crossing Singh to end in a position commensurate with Singh's starting point (illustrated in Figure 2.2). For, partly drawn by love and partly pushed by fear, he ended his life abandoning Christianity and fully adopting a local form of political Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Stokes gradual drift to Hinduism through engagement with an inculturated form of Christianity, Singh moves quickly (and dramatically) to Christianity. Despite this seemingly rapid change of orientation of faith, Singh seemingly remains rooted in an eastern material religion, while happily employing religious concepts and understandings from the West, as well as broadening his sphere of political influence to the West. It is notable, however that both Stokes and Singh have their transformations nurtured in the liminal space that the Himalayas provides, and both can be understood within an established archetype of Himalayan Spirituality. It is, therefore, possible to view the lives and ministries of Stokes and Singh as part of a broader development of a certain kind of inculturated Christian material religion that has strong roots in the Shimla district. However, it is important to note (as depicted in Figure 2.2) that they circle (clockwise in the diagram) around Simla city without ever being as central to its material landscape as might be expected.



**Figure 2.2** Categorizing Singh and Stokes.

In this chapter we have established that a certain kind of Christian material religion circulates around Himachal Pradesh and that this expression of material religion draws on both Western and Eastern aligned, yet distinct, traditions, which understand of the region as the Land of the Gods. Through Stokes and Singh we have seen how the Christian material religion worked with this traditional understanding, at the same time as adding to and transforming it, while also drawing into the weave significant actors from both the indigenous and colonial communities. Yet, as noted above, this tradition seems to have found resistance within the city of Shimla and in the next chapter we must therefore turn to explore further what the tradition of material religion within the city was. For, only then will we be in the position to fully comprehend how the movement from the periphery into the centre of Shimla of the sort of material religion described above, could act as the final trigger for Sita's tears.



